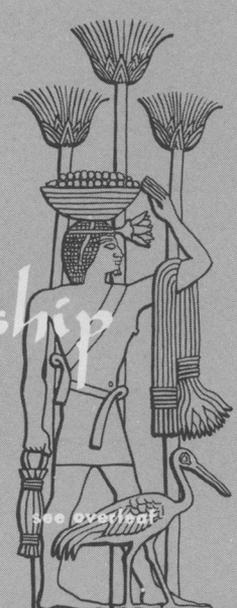
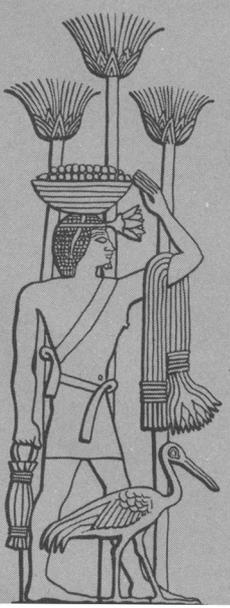
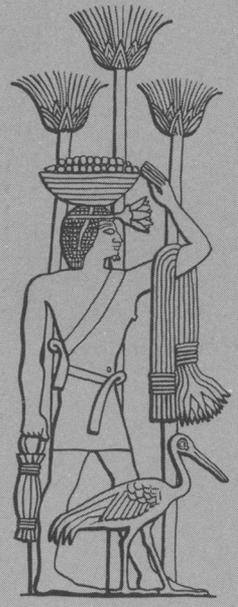
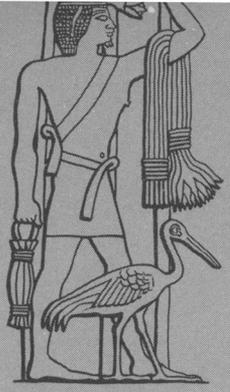


Handwritten hieroglyphs from the Papyrus Ebers, arranged in ten horizontal lines. The script is a form of ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs, used for medical prescriptions.

Portion of the Papyrus Ebers



Medical Librarianship

see overleaf

# The Papyrus Ebers

The Papyrus Ebers, dating from the first half of the 16th century B. C., is one of the earliest medical works in existence. Primarily a collection of recipes for treating various diseases and symptoms, it constitutes an important source of information about ancient Egyptian medicine. Many of the recipes are attributed to the period 2500–3000 B. C.

The document begins with invocations of the gods and recitals to be spoken when treating a patient, but it also contains between 700 and 800 prescriptions arranged according to organs and diseases, two short treatises on the heart and vessels, and a brief surgical section. Diseases are rarely described.

The prescriptions, which make up the major portion of the papyrus, include both internal and external remedies. Names and amounts of ingredients to be used are specified, and instructions for preparation are given. Drugs were boiled and strained or pounded in a stone mortar. When given as potions, they were mixed with beer, wine, milk, or water. Sometimes the drugs were formed into candy with honey or baked into cakes. Pills were made with bread dough. For ointments, active ingredients were mixed with fat.

Hundreds of substances are mentioned in the prescriptions. Metallic salts—lead, iron, and possibly antimony, for example—were recommended for treating diseases of the eyes; castor oil, colcyntn, and senna were used as purgatives; ox liver was prescribed for night blindness; turpentine was one of many remedies for worms.

The treatises on the heart and vessels indicate that the ancient Egyptian physician may have known that the heart is the center of the

vascular system: “The beginning of the physician’s secret: knowledge of the heart’s movement and knowledge of the heart. There are vessels from it to every limb. As to this, when any physician, any surgeon, or any exorcist applies the hands or his fingers to the head, to the back of the head, to the hands, to the place of the stomach, to the arms or to the feet, then he examines the heart, because all his limbs possess its vessels, that is: the heart speaks out of the vessels of every limb.” (Translation by B. Ebbell, 1937.)

Some authorities consider the Papyrus Edwin Smith, a surgical treatise written during the 17th century B. C., the only really scientific work among the several Egyptian papyri, but others regard the Papyrus Ebers as equally valuable for its information in many different fields of medicine. These papyri are a part of the accumulation of medical literature which eventually gave rise to the profession of medical librarianship, as explained in the article, *Medical Librarianship*, by Dr. Estelle Brodman, p. 473 of this issue.

The Papyrus Ebers was purchased by Professor Georg Ebers in 1873, and a facsimile edition, with introduction and vocabulary, was published in 1875. It was first translated in 1890 by H. Joachim, a German physician.

—SOURCES: *A History of Medicine*, by Ralph H. Major, 1954. *A History of Medicine*, by Henry E. Sigerist, 1951. *Medicine Throughout Antiquity*, by Benjamin Lee Gordon, 1949.

*The figure used in the frontispiece border design is from a casket panel lent to the National Gallery of Art by C. S. Gulbenkian, Esq.*

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